Assassinations Panel Will Survive: O'Neill

By Jerry O'Leary
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Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, whose prophecies are often self-fufilling, predicts that the House Assassinations Committee will find a way today to continue its investigations despite the bitter feud involving its chairman and the committee membership and the chief counsel.

O'Neill meets this morning with Majority Leader Jim Wright, D-Tex., and Committee Chairman Henry B. Gonzalez, D-Tex., to hear firsthand why the chairman is trying to fire chief counsel Richard A. Sprague.

Then, at 2 o'clock this afternoon, the committee will meet for one last try a reconciling Gonzalez with the controversial chief counsel and the other 11 committee members, who appear to be supporting Sprague.

UNLESS THE select committee finds a way to iron out the dispute, which O'Neill indicated yesterday is what he expects, the probes into the murders of President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. probably will not survive after the remaining five weeks of their current mandate.

Appearing on the CBS interview show "Face The Nation" yesterday, O'Neill said that he has no power to remove Gonzalez from the chairmanship and that Sprague's continued presence as chief counsel is for the committee to decide. The speaker said he did not think Gonzalez should step down. He also said he thought Sprague was a "tremendously able man" and noted that the majority of the committee thinks Sprague is doing a good job.

O'Neill's comments indicate he is using his powerful role as speaker of the House to persuade the committee to settle its squabble in this afternoon's session because its members believe there is justification for the committee to continue.

ALTHOUGH GONZALEZ has leveled formidable charges of dishonesty, deceit, unacceptable performance, financial irresponsibility and violation of House rules against Sprague, there is probably a remote chance that the chairman and Sprague's backers on the committee may find a compromise that will permit the panel to get on with its work.

If it doesn't, today's session — billed as an organization meeting — will dissolve into what one member called "a blood-on-the-floor" situation, and the committee will self-destruct in acrimony.

The House is not likely to authorize additional existence and funding for the committee after its temporary mandate expires March 31 unless that feud is settled today.

Gonzalez has shown no signs of weakening up to now in his determination that Sprague must go. The other committee members, especially Del. Walter E. Fauntroy, D-D.C., and Richardson Preyer, D-N.C., have been equally adamant that Gonzalez has no right to fire Sprague and that the former Philadelphia prosecutor should be retained.

SPRAGUE AND Gonzalez have rubbed each other the wrong way ever since the Texan succeeded the previous chairman, Thomas N. Downing, D-Va., who was willing to let the aggressive chief counsel run the committee staff and its procedures without much supervision. What started out as a personality clash escalated into a battle between Gonzalez and Sprague over who was going to run things.